

Will Also Discuss Other Improvements Needed in Accountability and Transparency Beginning Monday at VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, H.J. Heinz Division Facility
January 7, 2010

MEDIA, PA — Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) today announced plans to visit a number of VA facilities throughout Pennsylvania in preparation for a meeting with the VA Under-Secretary for Health to discuss increased accountability and transparency in the VA, particularly in the process of inspecting VA Medical Centers (VAMCs). That meeting is the result of a long-running dialogue between Congressman Sestak and VA Secretary Eric Shinseki (attached) in the aftermath of revelations of poor conditions at the Philadelphia Community Living Center (CLC), Philadelphia Veterans who had not received proper care for their prostate cancer, unauthorized blood draws and a 2008 report by the American Legion of \$8 million dollars in incorrect billing procedures.

The Congressman's first meeting with VA representatives is scheduled for Monday at 12:15 PM at the H.J. Heinz VA Progressive Care Center in Pittsburgh.

"I understand that until 2007, the VA had been grossly underfunded for decades and that for too long VA employees were asked to do too much with too little," said Congressman Sestak. "However, as the nation finally makes the investment it should in the health care of our Veterans, we must be certain that those taxpayer dollars are applied to a medical system that is caring, effective, and efficient. The only way to do that is to build a better inspection program that is based on accountability and transparency.

"What I hear every day from frustrated Pennsylvanians is that they no longer believe government is capable of managing complex programs. They want the changes necessary throughout government necessary to give them confidence their hard earned tax dollars are well spent. And, they want people held accountable when that is not the case. In addition to the unnecessary pain and suffering of those failed brachytherapy treatments, the VA is facing lawsuits that could cost the VA millions of dollars. At a time when we are trying to redress the failure of Congress in 2003 to protect the ability of millions of aging Veterans to enroll in the VA health care system, those dollars should be going to more Community Living Centers (CLCs) so that the sons and daughters of Veterans will know their loved ones receive the care they earned.

"As the most senior Veteran ever elected to Congress, I have a moral responsibility to our nation's Veterans. I understand how much those men and women and their families have sacrificed on our behalf and I look forward to working with General Shinseki, the leaders of Veteran service Organizations and my colleagues in Congress to prove to the American people that government is still capable of great things. We must build the VA into our nation's most trusted health care system."

His response to Secretary Shinseki's correspondence (pasted below), emphasizes that the deep concerns Congressman Sestak expressed following his visit to the Philadelphia Community Living Center (CLC) had not been fully addressed. The Congressman has submitted a bill (HR 3843, the Transparency for America's Heroes Act) to require the

Department of Veterans Affairs to publish and make publicly available inspections of Veterans Administration (VA) facilities within 30 days after the completion of a review. The legislation stipulates that these records must be easily accessible and placed on the Department's website. Its introduction followed the release of a disturbing Long-Term Care Institute report on past conditions at Philadelphia's Community Living Center. That report was disseminated only following a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) by the media and after VA protocol had prevented dissemination of the document.

The Congressman maintains there must be an accountable review of inspection reports, as evidenced by the fact that multiple reviews of the Philadelphia found a failure to 'provide a sanitary and safe environment' for residents.

At his visits to VA facilities, the Congressman will take input on areas in which Congress must act to provide the necessary resources for our Veterans. In addition, he will emphasize his objective is to work with the VA to assure our citizens, Veterans, and their families that transparency, oversight, and accountability are integral to every aspect of the VA's management and leadership. As part of this, a mechanism must be put in place to ensure thorough and accessible reviews of facility inspections.

Here is the full text of the Congressman's letter today to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki:

Dear General Shinseki,

I appreciate the effort invested in our correspondence and your commitment to a VA system that provides the services our Veterans deserve. We are fortunate to have you as the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs in making that happen. However, neither the December 30th letter I received nor my September 26th visit to the Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center (PVAMC) Community Living Center (CLC), has addressed all of my concerns regarding the quality and transparency of the VAMC inspection process.

Though your letter referenced the incident at the Philadelphia CLC and the blood draws at the Philadelphia VAMC, it neglected to mention the prostate cancer treatment problem. That situation alone has, by some accounts, resulted in over \$100 million in lawsuits and countless questions by Veterans and their families as to how this situation occurred and what is being done to prevent a reoccurrence.

My interest in this issue is not abstract. As we both know from our military experience, "you get what you inspect not what you expect." Recent problems with VA medical care have brought into question not only the government's accountability in caring for our Veterans, but unfortunately, in the eyes of many, its commitment to doing so. As you know, and as you have committed to making happen, care for Veterans must not only be first-rate, it must be cost effective. Unless there is an open and verifiable system of inspecting VA Medical Centers, Community Living Centers, and Community Based Outpatient Clinics, I am not confident that we will be able to justify the increased investments in VA medical care that I and many Veterans believe are essential. For example, an American Legion site visit to the PVAMC of April 21, 2008, indicated that an Audit performed by Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) revealed the

PVAMC was \$8,000,000 in debt to BCBS and that 25 new coders were hired to “re-capture numbers and manage the issue of misplacement of monies.” In all of my visits to that important facility, this \$8,000,000 issue was never raised. I would not have received the American Legion report without requesting it, and at this point, I cannot be certain the practices that created the problem have been corrected at Philadelphia or other VAMCs.

I look forward to the meeting with Acting Under Secretary for Health Gerald Cross. In preparation for that meeting, I will complete visits of selected VA facilities to support development of the meeting agenda and identify new initiatives that will help the VA become the most trusted health care provider in our nation.

My Chief of Staff will be in touch with Acting Under Secretary Cross to discuss the timing of our meeting and my Schedulers will communicate a visit plan for selected VISN-4 facilities to Director Michael Moreland.

As always, thank you for your service to our Nation and our Veterans.

Warmly,

Joe Sestak
Member of Congress

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of “Deep Blue,” the Navy’s anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the “Global War on Terrorism.” He served as President Clinton’s Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.

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